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ABSTRACT

A study reports on a collaborative investigation in which a kindergarten teacher and a teacher educator worked together to better understand the processes of emerging literacy and emerging teaching abilities. The rural/suburban district serves a population which is diverse in terms of culture, economy, and family structure. The kindergarten teacher decided to drop the school-wide letter-a-week program to enable expansion of her theme-based program. The kindergarten teacher, teacher educator, and two field students met once monthly during the 1995-96 school year to examine children's literacy development and discuss appropriate teaching strategies. A modified print assessment was administered to all students. Results indicated that (1) 14 of the 26 children entered kindergarten with almost complete alphabet knowledge and demonstrated ability to follow print in extended text; (2) the kindergarten teacher's concerns in November focused in reporting to parents; (3) January was a month of frustration--frequent snow days interrupted the daily routine and the students did not seem to be progressing beyond the November gains; and (4) March became a month of major growth--all but one child had more than surpassed the required curriculum. The kindergarten teacher and the teacher educator continued their work into the next school year. Findings suggest that teachers and teacher educators can work and learn together within realistic time constraints, the kindergarten teacher was able to affirm her decision to create her own curriculum, and the preservice teachers confronted the reality of the wide range of student abilities and interests. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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Focusing on Kindergarten Children's Literacy Development: A Tale of Two Practices

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Researchers studying the development of written language from an emergent literacy perspective have documented that young children develop literate abilities through active and meaningful engagement in real life tasks (Goodman, 1989; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). Based on this emergent literacy research, recommendations for best kindergarten practice include: daily repeated readings of predictable storybooks and poems; shared reading and writing activities such as a morning message and the recording of classroom experiences through language experience charts; and, opportunities for children to experiment with sound/letter correspondence through individual drawing and writing (McGee & Richgels, 1996). The role of the teacher changes from following a prescribed curriculum to developing an interactive curriculum based on observations of children's learning and an understanding of the process of emergent literacy development (Jalongo, 1992).

Although recommendations for best literacy practice are not new, the implementation of an emergent literacy curriculum still remains problematic. To teach from an emergent literacy perspective requires not only learning new teaching strategies, but often requires a change in beliefs about the role of teacher and the process of young children's learning (Bruneau & Ambrose 1992). Teaching young children is complex and classroom events do not often unfold as neatly as the research literature may suggest. Dudley-Marling (1995) so clearly describes his difficulties in attempting to implement a holistic literacy program during the year he took leave from his university position to teach in a public school classroom. Dudley-Marling reports that his daily practice was far more ambiguous and dilemma-ridden than that which is typically presented in readings of holistic literacy practice. He suggests that when teachers face contradictions between actual daily teaching and their perceptions of ideal practice, they can easily feel inadequate in attempts to change instruction.

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Collaboration is often suggested as a means of supporting the difficult change process. Weaver and Henke (1992) recommend that teachers have opportunities for reflection and dialogue as they continually engage in the on-going process of curriculum development. When teachers have systematic opportunities to share ideas there is support for context specific problem solving which characterizes the on-going refinement of practice.(Bruneau & Vacca, 1996). Unfortunately, not all teachers have support from other faculty members in their particular school settings.

Relatedly, best practice in teacher education has also been researched with major changes in teacher education recommended (Goodlad, 1990; The Holmes Group, 1995). Learning to teach is no longer understood as the mere development of a repertoire of teaching strategies, but as the active construction of a reflective problem-solving disposition to curriculum development and interactions with children. Teacher education programs need to provide multiple opportunities for preservice students to engage in learning about teaching and to simultaneously engage in planning, teaching, and reflecting on their emerging teaching through integrated methods course work and work with children in classrooms (Ross, 1990). Teacher educators are encouraged to engage in understanding their preservice students to build curricular experiences which expand individual student beliefs (LaBoskey, 1994). The change process in teacher education is also fraught with dilemmas and context specific difficulties which teacher educators must consider as they, too, strive to develop best practice (Bruneau, Ford, Scanlon, & Strong, 1996).

Importantly, recent reform movements have attempted to support both changes in practice in public schools and university classrooms (The Holmes Group, 1995) When schools of education and public schools work together, significant and needed change is possible (Goodlad, 1990). Working and learning together requires true collaboration in which both classroom teachers and university teachers attempt to learn from one another as they dialogue, raise questions, and seek answers to these questions (Klassen & Short, 1992).

This study reports on one collaborative investigation in which we, a kindergarten teacher (Kathy) and a teacher educator (Beverly) worked together to better understand the processes of emerging literacy and emerging teaching abilities.

Context:

Kathy is one of 7 teachers who teach in a centrally located building which enrolls all of her district's 172 kindergarten children. The school district is a rural/suburban district which serves a population which is diverse in terms of culture, economy and family structure. Despite funding which is below the state mean, the district has remained committed to early childhood by offering one of the few all/day every day kindergarten programs in the area. The 7 teachers plan together and several are highly committed to a popular "alphabet letter" program. Weekly school-wide themes are developed to match the letter of the week.

During the past few years Kathy has steadily implemented holistic literacy activities: a morning message, daily journal writing, and most recently has begun to use poems and charts as a basis for engaging children in shared reading experiences. In doing so, Kathy found that the weekly "alphabet" themes limited her expanding curriculum development. She decided to eliminate the weekly letter program to enable an expansion of her theme-based program. Direct teaching of literacy would occur through shared reading of poems and focusing the children's attention on alphabet letters and words within the daily poem. In making this change, Kathy asked the following questions which initiated this research project: (1) Will my children be learning what they really need to know? Specifically, will they really learn their alphabet letters if I completely drop the letter of the week?; (2) How shall I teach literacy? How do I know what that what I'm doing is meeting children's needs?"; (3) How can I explain each child's literacy learning to parents?; and, (4) I know I should be using portfolios but I never get beyond collecting papers. I'm not sure how portfolios can be valuable to me?

Beverly teaches literacy methods courses in an Early Childhood Program

at a nearby state university. The program is in process of moving from a separate methods course/separate field program to one in which field and methods courses are integrated. During the past years she has also made changes in her teaching, particularly in centering course content around assessment and emphasizing the process of literacy teaching as a recursive assessment, planning, teaching, reflecting cycle.

The school in which Kathy teaches is one of the network of Early Childhood Schools in which Beverly's students work as field students and student teachers. Kathy and Beverly have worked together for 5 years in the typical roles of cooperating teacher and supervisor, but have also engaged in extensive conversations about teaching literacy to kindergarten children; ideas which Kathy has incorporated in her teaching. And, when Beverly observes preservice students, she also observes kindergarten children to note their reactions to teaching strategies and literacy development. This knowledge has helped Beverly in continually refining her literacy methods courses. Beverly raised questions to help clarify related issues in her teacher education practice: (1) How can I help Kathy connect children's development with her teaching strategies?; (2) What does a typical kindergarten class look like in terms of literacy development?; (3) How can I help my undergraduates learn to teach through an assessment, instruction, reflection cycle?; (4) How can I help my undergraduates learn to work with children who do not easily develop literate abilities?; and, (5), How will this experiences further impact my own teaching?

Data Collection and Analysis

This is a study of practice. We decided to meet once monthly during the 1995-96 school year to examine children's literacy development and discuss appropriate teaching strategies. We audio-taped our 7 conversations. During the fall semester two field students, who were assigned to Kathy's classroom two mornings per week, joined us in our conversations. The transcripts were transcribed and inductively analyzed for categories and themes following procedures of discrepant case analysis (Erickson, 1986). Beverly conducted the

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data analysis and shared the themes with Kathy for confirmation.

Additionally we modified a print assessment (Agnew, 1982) to determine children's beginning abilities to attend to print which the field students administered to all the children in October. Each month Beverly interviewed several children to attempt to understand their developing perceptions of reading and writing. As she interacted with children, Beverly wrote handwritten notes detailing their responses. These notes we used to begin our conversations in which we typically posed 3 questions to focus our discussions: (1) What do the children seem to be learning?; (2) What kinds of individual support might be helpful?; and, (3) What kinds of class activities would be appropriate? Kathy shared her observations, insights, and reflections of her on-going instruction as we talked about what we thought the children were learning.

Findings

Our findings are presented chronologically by key months across the 1995-96 school year to illustrate important changes in the children's literacy development, Kathy's instructional strategies, and, later, Beverly's instructional strategies.

October. Fourteen of 26 children entered kindergarten with almost complete alphabet knowledge and demonstrated ability to follow print in extended text We believed this finding strongly.

confirmed Kathy's decisions to not use the letter of the week program. The children's ability to track print matched well with the morning message and poem in which children shared in the daily reading and then located familiar words and letters. Importantly, 8 children were identified in the screening as not having strong alphabet knowledge or print awareness. These students we decided would receive extra attention from Kathy and/or the field students in daily journal writing. We emphasized the importance of pointing out words and letters as we took these children's dictation. The assessment gave us a clear picture of who needed help and how we might help them make better sense of the

curriculum.

Although the children's alphabet knowledge was strong, the children were reluctant to use invented spelling. The children most frequently responded with "I can't write," or copied a few words. Knowing this, Kathy set a goal to help children develop confidence to write. Frequent one on one interactions were recommended and the field students believed they had a clearer idea of how they might help children through daily interactions.

November. Kathy's concerns in November focused on reporting to parents. Simultaneously, Beverly was searching for a model which would clearly illustrate children's literacy development for her preservice students and found The Primary Language Arts Guidelines

which met both of our needs. Our very long November conference involved studying each child's recent writing and identifying abilities found in the writing. As we examined what children could do, we could also plan how to expand instruction. For example, we found that most of the children seemed to be between pattern 3 and 4 in their writing. That is, the typical child copied a few words, and was willing to try to write a first sound of a word if an adult would emphasize the sound and provide encouragement. A few children we noted were a bit more advanced and were beginning to write 2 or 3 consonant sounds in a word. As we identified individual children's strengths and dialogued about how to effectively interact to support continued growth, the field students began to learn when they might expect more from a child and how they could encourage further development. This process helped answer the field students' frequently asked question, "How do I know when to try to stretch a child into invented spelling?"

Kathy decided to condense the PLAS guidelines to a one page summary

which she reported worked extremely well in conferencing with parents. The parents not only received a clear report on what their child could do; but, also could see the progression across the primary grades. Kathy stated having both kinds of information

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helped her clarify the process of emerging literacy to her parents who found this approach very different from what they had expected in kindergarten.

By November, we had begun to answer our questions. Kathy could see that children were learning and how to use work collected in portfolios to document student learning. The field students were able to better understand how to interact with children and Beverly had found a workable model to demonstrate children's literacy development. The field students reported their assessment to their literacy class peers, who listened, asked questions, but nevertheless, received this information in a passive and second-hand format.

January. In contrast to the fall, January was a month of frustration for Kathy. Frequent snow days interrupted the daily routine and Kathy was stressed with additional building responsibilities. The children did not seem to be progressing beyond the November gains. That is, the children seemed content to copy words. Kathy also noted the children did not seem to be avid book readers. Books were rarely chosen at free choice time. She decided to begin to focus on interesting content areas such as the rainforest and, in doing so, she brought animal picture books into the classroom library. In February, a student teacher created a "rainforest canopy" cover for the library corner and interest in looking at books appeared to increase.

March. March became a month of major growth. Kathy was very excited to report that the children were now seeking books from the library. In interviews, the children eagerly reread stories they heard Kathy read aloud. The children chose books at their March interview indicating proudly, "I can read this book." When asked, "What do you do when you read?", children typically responded, "I look at the picture and remember the story." Five children had developed beyond picture clue reading and were using the first sound to help figure out words in predictable text. And, Kathy noted with great relief, 5 of the 8 children we had worried about in October were now becoming excited about "reading stories" and were engaging in first letter invented spelling. Two children from this original had advanced to using first letter clues in their storybook reading and were on the verge of

conventional reading. Only one boy continued to have difficulty remembering letters and did not demonstrate much interest in books.

Invented spelling continued to be more problematic. The children were able to use invented spelling, but not very excited to do so. The children could complete sentence stems with one word invented spellings. For example, after reading books about whales, the children completed a "whale-shaped fact book" in which they wrote 3 whale facts completing the sentence, "My whale ....." Most children used invented spelling to finish the sentence, "hs blobr (has blubber). ets fsh (eats fish) swms (swims). When asked, "How do you know what to write?", the children commonly answered, "I listen for the sounds." However, only 5 children appeared to invented spell independently in their journals; the rest preferred to continue to copy familiar words or copy words from books.

Nevertheless, Kathy was very pleased. All but one child had more than surpassed the required curriculum, not only knowing alphabet letters, but also developing the ability to use letters to form words. The children's growing interest in books was also gratifying. Kathy noted with pride that several other teachers had begun to use poetry, "But the poems they are using are pretty contrived because they are still matching them to the letter of the week."

Beverly was also pleased with answers to some of her questions. It seemed as if the monthly conversations had not only been helpful to Kathy; but helpful to her in affirming kindergarten children's typical timeline for development across the school year. Having observed the process of one year's development provided real-classroom experiences to share in her teaching. The field students who had participated early-on had developed valuable strategies for assessing and interacting with emerging readers and writers, However, as Beverly listened to the field students who had not participated in this setting, struggle with issues of assessing emerging literacy in their kindergarten student teaching placements, it was clear that more needed to be done to better support the beginning teachers' understandings.

Fall, 1996. We have continued our work into the 1996-97 school year. Two stories seem especially noteworthy with respect to our continued refinement of practice. Beverly decided to expand the assessment piece to include all students in the literacy methods class. The preservice students spent two mornings in Kathy's and another teacher's classrooms, first observing the experienced teachers' morning print routine and then interacting with small groups of children in shared reading and writing experiences. On the second morning, the preservice students individually administered the print assessment to the 5 children they had previously worked with. Despite the limitations inherent in any one-time assessment, we all learned from this experience.

The preservice students were surprised at the kindergarten children's reluctance to draw and write. Having previous coursework in language development and experience with "advantaged children" who attended the university's preschool, the preservice students expected an enthusiasm for writing. This did not occur. "Why?", the preservice students wanted to know and how can I as a teacher help a child who is afraid to write?" This was now their question (not the topic of a lecture) and genuine brainstorming as to how to support emerging writers' development occurred. Interest in the kindergarten children continued throughout the fall semester. For example, when the field student assigned to Kathy's room shared the children's November journals which evidenced beginning letter strings and individual words, the preservice students celebrated this success. Documentation from the preservice students' reflective notes on the assessment experience and Beverly's teacher's journal support these findings.

The 1996 summaries of the two classes are reported at the bottom of Table I and demonstrate a pattern similar to the previous year. That is, many children entered kindergarten with the ability to name alphabet letters, the ability to track print, but, again, were not confident to attempt writing. The similar pattern from one year to the next supports the decision to not follow a weekly letter program, but, importantly, to be aware early on of those

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children who will need individual interactions. As previously done, we identified children in need of one-to-one interactions and Kathy and her present field student planned how to incorporate regular supportive journal writing interactions.

The second finding occurred in mid-November as Kathy and Beverly observed the field student conducting a morning message lesson in which the children were easily identifying letters and words. Simultaneously, we both realized, it was time to add more to the morning routine. We brainstormed on how to adapt a child's response sheet which would begin to focus children on writing individual responses in place of a teacher written morning message (Richgels, Poremba, & McGee, 1996). Kathy moved the morning message to an afternoon reflection, taking children's statements on what they remembered about their day. We have also begun to explore how phonemic awareness strategies (Yopp, 1992) may be included to facilitate children's awareness of sounds and develop knowledge and confidence for invented spelling.

Implications and Reflections

We began this study to explore kindergarten children's literacy development within a specific context. We believe our case study raises implications for collaboration, for supporting children's literacy development, and for supporting preservice teacher development.

Collaboration. This was a study of practice. This was not a study in which the university researcher spent a huge amount of time in a particular classroom, but rather found a way to be regularly involved with a particular teacher and children and still complete the wide range of teaching, research, and service to other partnerships schools, all part of a typical professorial workload. We chose to collaborate on our questions and dialogue about how to answer these. Kathy was an active participant in generating the study and problem solving throughout the year. However, she kept her traditional role of working with children and did not become involved in the data analysis. Beverly often piggy-backed the data collection with supervisory visits to field students and student teachers. She was not a part of the day to day

interactions, yet we found the monthly visits, interviews, and dialogue were enough to support our growth and development. We believe this study illustrates the possibility of working and learning together within realistic time constraints. It is important to emphasize, however, that this study was built on a 5 year relationship. We believe we have shown that it is possible to collaborate in a limited time frame, but would suggest the colleagueship necessary to true collaboration takes time to develop. Despite the fact that we maintained traditional roles, we believed we both learned a great deal from this study and our learning positively impacted the teaching of both kindergarten and preservice teachers.

The study also illustrates a way in which preservice field students can support children's learning in schools. The students were able to give regular attention to students who needed additional support which would have been difficult for Kathy to accomplish on her own. In providing individual interactions the presrvice students have had experience in supporting the learning of children who do not enter school with strong literacy knowledge. We intend to further study the impact of tutoring on preservice teacher's knowledge and beliefs about teaching.

Kindergarten Literacy. Our study addressed practical issues of day to day teaching. Although we could have reported case study data of individual children's literacy development, we chose to report our data as group data, the kind of data teachers use in making instructional decisions. Based on our findings, Kathy was able to affirm that her decision to create her own curriculum not only did not hurt the children's development of required alphabet learning, but extended the children's learning in ways they would not have grown in a traditional program. Knowing that most children in your class already do know alphabet letters provides a strong rationale for not following a weekly letter program. Importantly, we were able to identify children who needed extra attention and define the nature of how we could strengthen the children's understanding of literacy using holistic teaching strategies. Kathy felt confident in communicating to parents about how she

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was teaching literacy and in describing the children's learning. This confidence and clear communication is needed at this time when holistic teaching strategies are so frequently critiqued in the popular press.

Teacher Education. During the 1995-96 school year, two preservice students were able to participate first hand, and develop their assessment, planning and teaching abilities. During the next year, we extended the assessment to all preservice students. Although these students did not have the rich follow-through the first pair received, the power of the "shared assessment experience" appeared to facilitate the preservice students' consideration of their expectations and beliefs about supporting literacy development in typical kindergarten classrooms. As a teacher educator who works in schools, Beverly is well aware of the range of abilities which children bring to kindergarten classrooms and attempts to communicate this range to her students. However, when the preservice students confronted the reality of the wide range of abilities and reluctance to engage in writing, the preservice students began to actively raise questions on how they could support children's learning. This model of developing shared real classroom experiences for preservice teachers and then facilitating dialogue and problem-solving based on these experiences holds promise for further implementation and investigation.

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